

THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE BIRD ALLIANCE // VOL. 109 NO. 1 WINTER 2025



DECOLONIZING BIRDING

BY RYAN NAKANO

As soon as Teresa “Bird” Wicks started speaking as a child, she spoke of birds. Obsessed with their lives and what they could teach her, it wasn’t long before she began birdwatching with others at her local Audubon chapter. “There was one critical experience where I couldn’t identify a Yellow Warbler, and another birder criticized me instead of teaching me,” Wicks recalled. “After that, I never went birding in the classical sense.”

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Yellow Warbler.
Steve Zamek



Whitney Grover (right) and Dan Brown (left) birding shortgrass prairie in Colorado.

Alex Smolyanskaya

in San Francisco, adding to her understanding of the importance of habitat preservation in urban settings. Her wide-ranging background brings unique perspectives to her new position, equipping her to guide conservation efforts with a blend of practicality and innovation.

In 2019, Whitney completed the Golden Gate Bird Alliance's Master Birder class, deepening her birding knowledge and skills. She also co-founded the SF Bay chapter of the Feminist Bird Club, an inclusive group that fosters a supportive space for bird enthusiasts of all backgrounds. Her leadership within this group demonstrates her commitment to building a diverse and engaged community of conservationists.

Outside of her professional accomplishments, Whitney recently completed a "Big Year" in Alameda County, identifying 273 bird species so far in 2024. This impressive count, while not an all-time record, places her at the top for the county this year—a testament to her dedication and passion for birds.

This promotion comes at a pivotal moment for the Alliance. As our conservation projects grow in scope and complexity, we need a dedicated leader to oversee these initiatives. In her new role as Director of Conservation, Whitney will focus solely on advancing our conservation mission, implementing and managing projects that directly impact bird habitats and address ecological challenges in the region. This shift will improve our organization's ability to collaborate effectively with partners and funders and allow GGBA to make a greater conservation impact.

CONSERVATION IN FOCUS

BY GLENN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

I am thrilled to announce the promotion of Deputy Director Whitney Grover to Director of Conservation. As Director of Conservation, Whitney will lead the Golden Gate Bird Alliance's conservation programs, addressing critical issues like habitat preservation, climate resilience, and policy advocacy. This role perfectly aligns with Whitney's passion, experience, and dedication to protecting Bay Area bird populations.

Joining the Alliance as a member in 2015, Whitney became a Board Member in 2020

and served as the Chair of the San Francisco Conservation Committee. Recently, she completed a Master's degree in Environmental Management from the University of San Francisco, with a thesis focused on the impact of offshore wind farms on bird populations.

Before joining the conservation field, Whitney worked in healthcare as a hospital pharmacy buyer and served on the hospital's environmental action committee. She also has experience in sustainable landscaping

NEWS BRIEFS

Oiled Wildlife Care Network (OWCN)

We are actively recruiting interested members and non-members to become trained OWCN volunteers through GGBA in case of an oil spill in the Bay Area. If you're interested please contact our Volunteer Manager Janet Carpinelli at jcarpinelli@goldengatebirds.org.

Accessible Birding Internship

Interested in engaging diverse young professionals in natural resource careers and promoting inclusivity by encouraging applicants with disabilities? Consider applying to the Environment for the Americas, Birdability, and National Park Services' Accessible Birding Internship by February 7th. Learn more at environmentamericas.org.

New GGBA Staff Member

GGBA has hired its newest employee Makayla Pearce as our Office Manager. Previously working as the Office and Operations Associate for Urban Adamah, another Berkeley-based nonprofit, Pearce will bring her professional administrative experience and background in education, making a great addition to the team.

Conservation Director and Development Officer

With the hiring of our Office Manager, GGBA has promoted Whitney Grover to serve as our Conservation Director and George Marschall to serve as our Development Officer. These new internal staff developments allow GGBA to continue to grow and further its mission.

DECOLONIZING from page 1

Wicks, who currently works as the Eastern Oregon Field Coordinator for Bird Alliance of Oregon and identifies as a sp'q'n'i' (Spokane) descendant, has spent time thinking about “the classical sense” and its alternatives ever since.

In her 2020 dissertation, she argues that the “classical sense” or “colonial/western epistemologies and ontologies” alone are insufficient and unjust when it comes to measuring how well we know and understand ecosystems.

So what is just? What might supplement our understanding of the wild world around us? These questions not only drive the work of researchers like Wicks, but they are also at the heart of a new course offered by Golden Gate Bird Alliance.

At the beginning of September, twenty individuals gathered online to join instructors Rachel Katz and Joe Joseph in exploring the idea of Decolonizing Birding.

“Decolonize’ was used in order to emphasize the process of looking back at history and the ways in which colonization formed birding into what it is today,” co-instructor Joe Joseph said.

Prior to the popular practice of birdwatching, European ornithologists collected bird skins and eggs in the 1800s which “often reflected deep-rooted cravings for status” according to Smithsonian Magazine article “How Bird Collecting Evolved into Birdwatching”.

One of the most well known ornithologists, John James Audubon, set about to collect wildlife specimens in 1843. During his journey he took several skulls of indigenous peoples and sent them to American craniologist Dr. Samuel George Morton, who used his growing skull collection to push “scientific” theories of racial hierarchy.

A year later, the idea of “Manifest Destiny” became widely popular and was used to justify settler expansion and the belief in American exceptionalism.

Today, this history can be found through the common names of birds like the Townsend’s Warbler, Scott’s Oriole, and Audubon’ Shearwater, all three of which were named after individuals who



Janet Carpinelli

Participants in the Decolonizing Birding Class.

“In order to decolonize birding you would need to connect people to land everywhere, not just in wildplaces that we have preserved from development.”

either stole Native American remains or actively participated in genocide.

In addition to discussing the movement to remove eponymous names from birds, GGBA’s Decolonizing Birding class engaged in weekly readings on decolonization, indigenous knowledge, communalism, and feminist ecologies.

“For me the root of decolonizing birding is to think about the indigenous perspective and remember that there is an entire history of everything that came before colonization,” participant Patricia Tsao said.

Prior to the first class session, students read about the continuing histories of several local indigenous peoples, including Muwekma, Coast Miwok, Ramaytush, and Lisjan. During their visits to various Bay Area birding sites, participants shared the history of each place, acknowledged the original stewards of the land, and considered nonwestern ways to be in relationship with nature.

“In order to decolonize birding you would need to connect people to land

everywhere, not just in wildplaces that we have preserved from development,” Teresa Wicks said.

Where “classical birding” might prioritize connecting exclusively to “natural spaces,” keeping lifelists, and competing with other birders for status, a decolonial approach might emphasize concepts like rehabilitation — the process of creating intimate connections and understandings of place including the impact of exploitation, colonization, and development.

By the end of GGBA’s Decolonizing Birding class, participants were asked to share their own philosophy of birding. Alfonso Orozco, Associate Program Manager of Parks California and a class participant, reflected on his own approach or, more accurately, what he’s learned from birds.

“Their beauty is not just in their feathers or their songs, but in the mystery of their nature—how they move through the world,” Orozco shared. “We are all part of the same natural rhythm, navigating seasons, challenges, and the pulse of everyday life.

TRAVEL WITH GGBA

BY ERIC SCHROEDER

The GGBA Travel Program began in 2007 when volunteer Ruth Tobey helped to organize our first birding tours. One of these was led by Dave Quady to Churchill, Canada. Eight people braved challenging weather conditions (in June!) and during the 10-day trip compiled a list of 171 species, including, from Dave’s trip report, “a marvelous encounter with a Northern Hawk Owl.”

Ruth gradually increased the number of trips, scheduling them for various sites in Mexico and Central America, as well as Cuba and Botswana. Since its inception, the program has grown steadily; in 2024 we ran ten trips, including tours in North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia.

We currently work with about a dozen vendors around the globe, ranging from companies like Birding Ecotours, who run trips to all seven continents, to very small local companies that only offer trips in the countries where they operate. Unlike some birding programs, we don’t send GGBA leaders, but depend upon our vendors for guides, accommodations, meals, and transport. This practice helps us to keep our prices competitive.

Eddie Bartley and Noreen Weeden, who themselves are former GGBA trip leaders, traveled with us recently to Bhutan where they were particularly impressed with one of our small local vendors: “This trip was filled with spectacular scenery, amazing biodiversity (fantastic birds, oh my!) and super friendly Bhutanese people. The entire Langur Eco Travel crew were so kind, above and beyond hospitable.”

Marjorie Powell who holds the record for number of travel trips taken with GGBA—a dozen—offers two additional reasons she travels with us. The first is knowing other travelers: “it’s fun to know some people at the start of the trip. And even if you don’t know anyone, you’ll have people and birding locations in common.” Her other reason? Price. “GGBA-organized trips are less expensive than other trips to the same overseas location.”

But the main reason people travel with us is the places we go and the birds and mammals we see. Margie and Bob Gomez have



Greater Roadrunner.

Ivan Philippsen

been on six trips and enjoy the rare species they have encountered. Margie elaborates: “In Uganda we slid through the reeds on canoes to find the prehistoric-looking Shoebill; in Bhutan we climbed to a Buddhist monastery to see the stunningly colorful Monal.” She’s also a fan of mammals: “We’ve enjoyed amazing wildlife sightings—gorillas in Uganda; lions and tigers in India, red panda in Bhutan,; orangutans and pygmy elephants in Borneo, and jaguars in Brazil.” All trips for 2025 are currently posted on our website and we’re adding trips for 2026. Check our website for details. And if there’s a particular place you’d be interested in birding that’s not on our list, get in touch with one of us—Dawn Lemoine or Eric Schroeder. We love working with members to schedule trips to new birding destinations.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Great Backyard Bird Count

You can engage in critical community science by counting birds in your own backyard or wherever you are for a minimum of 15 minutes anytime between February 14-17 and reporting your findings to birdcount.org. The Great Backyard Bird Count is a great way to give back to birds!

Bringing Nature Home

Pick up free native wildflower seeds, browse native plant cutting and seed swap tables, watch Doug Tallamy’s presentation “Nature’s Best Hope”, and discuss how to better our communities during this Bringing Back The Natives Gardens event hosted at at the Castro Valley Library on January 28 (5:30-8pm).

Birdathon 2025

Our biggest fundraiser of the year Birdathon is coming back this March with new trips, the return of the Bay Birding Challenge, our online auction, and many more ways to support and protect birds in the Bay Area. Keep your eyes and ears open for more information coming soon!



From left: Red-shouldered Hawk courtesy Claude Lyneis; Jewel Lake, courtesy Chickmarkley/Wikimedia Commons.

JEWEL LAKE: BAY AREA HOTSPOT

BY TARA MCINTIRE

LOCATION

1500 Central Park
Dr, Berkeley, CA
94708

Starting early in the day, good birds are abundant the second you open your car door.

Jewel Lake is a birding gem hidden in the canyon shadows of Tilden Park.

Starting early in the day, good birds are abundant the second you open your car door. The open grass area and bordering native oak forest can yield Pacific Wrens, chickadees, towhees, and warblers.

Across the parking lot lies Wildcat Creek, a densely vegetated riparian zone ripe with thrush, sparrows, woodpeckers, juncos, and creepers. Under towering redwood trees by the Little Farm, are Red-bellied Sapsuckers, Red-shouldered Hawks, Black Phoebe, and American Robins. Check out the manure pile for sparrows (White-throated) and warblers, and scan the tops of the pine trees for Red Crossbills, swallows, and bluebirds.

Continue down the trail, bordered by a dense wall of willow and dogwood, where hummingbirds zip, flickers call, accipiters lurk, Red-tails soar, and Bushtits bounce. Midway to the lake, native plantings line recently installed ponds, starkly contrasting nearby eucalyptus grove which seems inhabited only by tolerant juncos, hawks, and Great Horned Owls.

A half mile from the parking lot awaits benches and a charming stone building (built in the 1940's) with flush restrooms. Sit down, kick back, and take it all in. Welcome to Jewel Lake!

Originally, Jewel Lake was a section of Wildcat Creek (technically, it still is), not becoming a "lake" until 1922

with the construction of a dam to create a drinking water reservoir. Over time, the lake has required periodic dredging to maintain its open water. This last occurred in 1991. Since then, visitors have watched the slow march of vegetation diminish their views across the water.

In response, the East Bay Regional Park District has been developing plans to address the lake's future with proposed options including maintaining the lake with recurring dredging, allowing the lake to revert to a wetland meadow, and removing the dam while restoring the creek.

Once you have searched the reeds for water species, choose one of three return options. The first cuts through the riparian area over a beloved wood boardwalk. Home to a bevy of thrush, Spotted Towhees, chickadees, and the occasional mega-rare bird, this makes an easy ½ mile return loop.

Alternatively, you can cross the footbridge to a narrow trail splitting into Upper and Lower Packrat trails. The lower trail follows the canyon bottom for 1/3 mile along the edge of Wildcat Creek. The trail weaves between upland oak habitat and riparian thicket for good views of warblers, kinglets, juncos, jays, and more woodpeckers. The upper trail climbs the hillside through a scrub area and holds surprises such as melodious Pacific Wrens and purring Wrentits, making it worth every extra vertical step. You made it!

Have a favorite birding site you'd like to share? Contact rnakano@goldengatebirds.org.

DONATIONS

Thank you for being a part of our donor and member community. We are deeply appreciative of every individual, business and organization that supports Golden Gate Bird Alliance. In this issue we recognize all Summer Appeal Donors and all of our major donors from the past year.

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\$10,000+

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Remember the Birds

Including Golden Gate Bird Alliance in your estate plan is a generous way to ensure that the Bay Area remains a haven for the birds you love.

A bequest can be expressed in a will as simply as, “I bequeath [a sum of money, a percentage of my estate, or an IRA, life insurance policy or investment/bank account] to Golden Gate Bird Alliance, 2150 Allston Way, Suite 210, Berkeley, CA 94704.”

Consult with your attorney to discuss your particular situation. Learn more on our website at goldengatebirdalliance.org/plannedgiving.

Please know that we work hard to ensure the accuracy of this list. If your name has been omitted or misspelled, let us know at 510.843.2222.

MEMBER PROFILE: ELIZABETH SOJOURNER

We caught up with Elizabeth Sojourner, a long-time GGBA supporter and bird advocate, to ask about her interest and involvement in birding and GGBA.

When did you first become interested in birds? I've always been interested in nature, but my first formal training began when I studied to be a Natural Sciences docent at OMCA. It was eye-opening for me to study California ecology and learn about the many biomes in our state which are so different from the places where I grew up. That sparked my interest in birds and how they interact with their environment.

What is your philosophy or approach to birding? I would say I'm a bird *watcher*. I'm not much of a lister. I'm interested in bird behavior. For example, I've been a Cornell FeederWatcher for many years. I like participating in the Christmas Bird Counts, seeing the same area year after year, and observing the changes in bird activity.

How have you been involved with Golden Gate Bird Alliance? I think I started with Oakland Christmas Bird Counts in 1987. I loved the area we surveyed so I continued in the same area until a few years ago. Around the time I retired I started doing bird surveys. I participated in the Arrowhead Marsh Mitigation Survey. If you remember, Golden Gate Bird Alliance sued the Port of Oakland which resulted in the creation of a mitigation marsh next to Arrowhead. For five years or more we surveyed over the winter season, documenting bird populations at the new marsh as well as the original part of Arrowhead. I participated in Alameda Tern Watch for a number of years, as well as the docent program along the Richmond



Elizabeth Sojourner.

Bay Trail. I participated in surveys that produced the GGBA Checklist of Birds of the Eastshore State Park. And of course GGBA field trips and classes have been part of my education.

I first got involved with GGBA because of my interest in conservation. In recent years there has been more emphasis on education and I'm impressed with the results. I see many enthusiastic and accomplished birders becoming new volunteers for GGBA, and I appreciate that.

Do you have a favorite bird? No one favorite, but all the birds that frequent my yard. I also love to watch Ospreys in flight, and Brown Pelicans.

What have you learned from the birds since you started bird-watching? I've had to learn a lot of patience! I had to learn to move slowly, to watch and listen intently in order to learn from the birds. These days there is so much to learn from the science of birds as well. I love learning about new work on migration, for instance, and bird evolution. For me there is always more to learn about birds.

Courtesy Elizabeth Sojourner

MASTHEAD

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MISSION STATEMENT

Golden Gate Bird Alliance's mission is to inspire people to protect Bay Area birds and our shared natural environment.

ABOUT GOLDEN GATE BIRD ALLIANCE

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SPEAKER SERIES

We will host Joanna Wu presenting on "The Most Overlooked birds in North America: Females" on January 16, 2025, 7 pm online via Zoom. Please visit us online for more Speaker Series dates and information at goldengatebirdalliance.org/education/speaker-series.



www.goldengatebirdalliance.org

 The Gull is printed with soy-based inks on chlorine-free paper, 30% postconsumer waste content.

Calling all bird advocates!

We are actively searching for volunteers to help out with our largest fundraiser of the year, the 2025 Birdathon. From photography and communications to set up and breakdown of our celebration, there are many opportunities to get involved. Interested? Please contact Janet Carpinelli at jcarpinelli@goldengatebirds.org.

BACKYARD BIRDER



Tara McIntire

Pygmy Nuthatch.

PYGMYS OF THE PINES (PYGMY NUTHATCH)

BY TARA MCINTIRE

Some say these gravity-defying tree-top dwellers sound like a squadron of squeaky dog toys. Others describe them sounding like secret operatives using morse code. And maybe a few (author included) hear salty-mouthed bandits spewing expletives, which once you hear it you will never unhear—‘Oh, sh*t, Oh, sh*t, Oh, sh*t!’ No matter what a birder’s ear hears, these calls are often the only identifying clues these nuthatches share.

A strong warbler neck comes in handy when trying to spy a glimpse of these wee birds—aptly named Pygmy Nuthatches (*Sitta*

pygmae)—which barely tip the scales at 10 grams. If lucky enough to lay eyes on one, you’ll note they are larger than a Golden-crowned Kinglet, but smaller than a Chickadee, often disappearing behind pinecones in the blink of an eye. Similar to Bushtits, they travel, forage, and even roost in communal flocks.

During the spring breeding season they move into abandoned woodpecker holes or other natural cavities, making adjustments and adding nesting materials as needed. Like our resident Acorn Woodpeckers, they enlist the help of offspring or other relatives to provide food to the female (who is the sole incubator) and young once hatched. Though these little ‘P-nuts’ prefer to dine mostly on insects lurking within tree bark crevices, they also eat and store pine nuts in certain geographic regions—especially in winter.

Like many other species, nuthatches face the challenge of habitat decline. In the face of climate change, coniferous forests are dying as temperatures warm and added stress increases their vulnerability to insects and disease. Dead trees provide critical nesting habitat, but in the face of wildfire threat, these dead trees are often removed, increasing competition for food and space with other cavity nesting species. Locally, we have seen a significant decline in Monterey pines (*Pinus radiata*), an introduced species on which our Pygmy nuthatch population depends.

Some favorite places to find these birds include Redwood and Tilden Regional Parks and Claremont Canyon Preserve. Brush up on your dendrological skills to seek out stands of Monterey pines, and don’t forget to look up and listen! You won’t need to curse to find them because pygmy nuthatches don’t migrate. Instead, you will have ample opportunity to explore the canopies in search of these adorable and gregarious birds year-round. No sh*t!